

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS THREE • Video Transcript

Hi, welcome back. This week's craft talk is by the poet Danny Khalastchi, who is the director of the Undergraduate Writing Track here at the University of Iowa. He is also the author of the book *Manoleria* and has a forthcoming book from McSweeney's.

He'll be talking to us today about what he calls the wild construction of possibility, giving us a sense of how a poem might be built with the various strategies a poet might employ in trying to take a one or a two or a three or a four line sketch and turn it in to something bigger.

My name is Danny Khalastchi and I'm here today to talk about poetry and when I was asked to participate in this MOOC I immediately started to think about how I would define poetry. And to me, when I look at what poetry can do and what poetry is and all of the things it has in it, inside of it, I think that I would define poetry as the wild construction of possibility. James Wright once said that poetry is the crucial relation between craft and the imagination.

And I think that poetry need to take into account the relationship between language, structure, and something that, for lack of a better way of defining it, I would call creative urgency. And if we can figure out a way to put all these together maybe we will get to a poem.

When I work with students who are just starting out in the world of poetry or writers who have been writing for years and want to talk about their manuscripts one of the things that we keep going back to is - what is a poem? What does it need to look like, to sound like? And I keep reminding them that poetry can be defined and built however they see fit.

So when I think of building a poem, or think of writing a poem I should say, I think of building a house. Some of you probably know the word stanza comes from the Italian word meaning 'little room' and I think that's a good jumping off point.

When we're writing a poem we're trying to construct those rooms, we're trying to use lines, we're trying to use words, to build something - to decorate it, to make it function in the way that we want it to so we want to live and be in those rooms.

But, with like any building, if the structure or the construction of it is weak in any point the whole building will collapse and that's scary. Writing can be scary. Some of us may not think we're master builders. Some of us may not think we have the knowledge or the experience to build anything at all but I don't think that's true.

I think that if we learn what tools we do have, if we study the way other people have built their homes, their poems, we can produce that work ourselves - something that we're proud of, something that we can stand behind, something that we can stand in without collapsing.



Raku (?) once said that poetry is difficult so good poets have to be fascinated by the difficulty, and I like that. Building something won't be easy but it's something we can do even if it's hard. And I think if we remain fascinated by that we'll be able to create it.

So then that gets us back to what I was talking about earlier which was building is hard, and how do we do it? I don't have a formula. I don't believe that there's one way to write a poem. And I also don't think that poems need to sound the same, make the same moves, follow the same ideas. I think that every time we write it's a new experience. Every blank page is blank. We can do whatever we want on it but I do think there's a couple things, five things, for me, that I like to remind my students and myself to kind of keep at the ready.

And I think if we keep those tools in the tool box, if we keep that tool box close to us, we can start to figure out when we want to use which tool and how we want to use it. When I think of those tools I think of them as the following five things; one, is the image. Two is the use of figurative language. Three is the use of the line. Four is the use of sound, repetition, rhyme, the music of poetry. And five would be form.

Now in a fifteen minute talk probably not gonna be able to talk about all of these or go way into depth, but I think it would be valuable for us to just kinda talk about what these ideas mean to help us understand, again, what the tools are and how we can use them in our own writing.

So, first and foremost, poetry doesn't all have to sound like Robert Frost, or it can. Poetry doesn't have to be poems in shapes, concrete poetry, using wild space like E.E. Cummings, or it can. As I said earlier, poetry is about possibility. And as you begin to write, I think remembering that even if we talk about image and what a good image can be and figurative language, what good figurative language can be.

Sometimes we gain as much by not using those tools, by being direct when others might use figurative language, or by using form when others might not think to. So we have to learn how to play with all these. And like I said earlier with this line--this idea of understanding the relationship, the shifting elements between language and structure and that's what we're trying to do. So first of all, I think of image. I think of something that Bob Hass once said. He has this line where he says, "a good image makes something so real, it's like being alive twice." So I think of going to the movie theater, right... You guys have all been to the movies, I imagine. I can go see what's it ????. By the time this is going on the Internet or wherever it's going. There's a new reboot of the Spider Man franchise, right. I can go see that movie. I'm a smart enough guy that I can remember the plot and I can tell it to you. I can tell you what happened. Spider Man did this, Spider man did that, then this happened, and then there was this great scene at the end--it was over. And because I can tell you what happened, you would understand it, but I don't think that would prevent most of you from wanting to go see the movie. You'd probably rather experience it for yourself. You want those lights to dim. You want the annoying person next to you with their cell phone to finally put it away so that you can really zone in and be in that movie for that minute. And again, you've also all been in the movie theater and you know what it's like when that person picks that cell phone up again, and it

does startle you. Or someone gets up to go to the bathroom, or get popcorn, they bump into your knee and suddenly you're thrown out of that experience. A good image in a poem can take you into that world, can remove you from where you are. And again, like Bob says, make it feel like it's coming to life for a second time, like you're living it. And that's what a good image is. When I think of imagery, there's lots of ways that we could approach it. But I think of in particular, and I'm actually going to just look at it real quick and read it to you because it's short.

There's a poem by Milosz, it's 'Encounter' and I just want you to think about image, about what you can see, not only what you hear but what you can see based on the language.

Encounter

We were riding through frozen fields in a wagon at dawn.
A red wing rose in the darkness.

And suddenly a hare ran across the road.
One of us pointed to it with his hand.

That was long ago. Today neither of them is alive,
Not the hare, nor the man who made the gesture.

O my love, where are they, where are they going
The flash of a hand, streak of movement, rustle of pebbles.
I ask not out of sorrow, but in wonder.

Now there's no huge similes here. There's nothing really except the language and the language that's giving us an image. We see the frozen fields, we see dawn. We see the red wing rise, we see the darkness. We see the hand moving, all because Milosz slowed down. He focused on the image. He brought it to life. For me, in poems- short poems, long poems, epic poems, whatever they are - when there are moments when the image flashes, where I can see something, I tend as a reader to not only allow it to bring itself to life but I end up realizing there's probably something there that I should be looking closely at because it's staring, literally staring, me back in the face.

So as a writer, if you know when to use imagery. If you know that you don't want somebody to just pass over the house that you're walking by in that poem, if you describe it and you bring it to life, the reader is going to see it and recognize it has importance. It's one way for you to signal to us, without just saying it, this is something that you need to pay attention to. Right?

So that's an image. And I think if we can bring our images to life in the poem the poem comes to life. And when the poem comes to life the reader's going to stay in it. And if the reader stays in it, you win.

So that's the image. Now, once we get into image there are many ways that we can start to use the language and one of those ways is using what is called figurative language. If every image that we

brought up, in language, had to be literal writing, living, reading, writing would be pretty boring, right? We could never say that - it would always have to be a cloud, it could never be the shape of a dinosaur riding a sailboat through the waters of hell, right?

It would have to be literal and if we allow it to be figurative, if we allow it to be representational of something else, of another idea, if we allow it to make comparison, not only does the language become more fresh and interesting, it stays with the reader longer. But it also comes to life in such a way that that comparison allows somebody to make a new connection.

Now, just like I was showing you with Milosz, I could show you one billion examples of how similes work. I could also probably show you one billion examples of how similes or metaphors don't work very well in poems but I want to just give you one example, maybe two, maybe three if I keep talking. So the one example that I often use is from a poem by Sharon Olds. And that poem is called 'Feared Drowned' and it's a poem about a woman at the beach with her family, and she's with her kids and her husband's there and he goes into the water and after a while she kind of looks up and she doesn't see him. And she gets nervous so she leaves her kids with, I don't know, somebody else by the, by the shore whatever. She kind of walks down to the water then she starts looking around, nervous, and at that point Sharon Olds uses the line, she says, she clutches her towel around her like a widow's shawl. Now that's pretty important, like a widow's shawl because what does that mean?

If I say something is like a widow's shawl I'm implying that there's no power, like the death has already happened. There's nothing the person can do and I don't have to say any of it, I just say 'like a widow's shawl' and we understand the comparison. The towel is now like a widow's shawl, the woman has no power, the death has happened, she feels the sadness, it's no longer something that will come back to life, etcetera.

That whole thing changes when we use figurative language. If we use the line 'she clutches the towel around her like Superman's cape,' right? If we say 'like Superman's cape' suddenly she does have the power. She can look out there, she can see somebody, she can go rescue whoever. She wants to but by choosing 'widow's shawl' right, we understand the fear, the sadness, the fact that this woman has given up, doesn't have the chance to fight back, to save her husband, etcetera. And that's one example that I often think of. And I think when you write, if you're going to use similes or metaphors, you want to find ones that actually work. And do what you want them to do. If you want to show sadness, best not to use 'Superman's cape.' Use the 'widow's shawl.'

Another simile, I said I would give you one and then I said two and three, I'm just going to keep going with that. Another example of a simile that I think about a poem by Norman Dubie called 'The Funeral.' If you haven't read that poem I highly suggest it.

But Dubie goes through this whole poem in which he thinks back to a family member when they were younger and how they would go and stand in the creek and the minnows would nibble at their toes and they would smell the different smells of being out on the farm and being in this world and it was very alive and full of images. Then at the end he makes a turn he says that they went to a funeral and at a certain point all of this beautiful language switches and he has this last line where he

says, and then one of his uncles in a deep voice, I'm paraphrasing because I don't remember the exact line there, but I remember this part. One of his uncles in a deep voice says, 'The cancer ate her like horse piss eats deep snow.'

And that's gross and it should be gross because cancer is terrible. And by saying horse piss hits deep snow we see it, we feel a guttural reaction in the gut, and then we also understand how fast it was. If you've ever poured water or watched an animal urinate on the snow you know that as soon as the water touches it, it just goes away. Right?

So we didn't have to say 'the cancer killed her very quickly' and there's nothing wrong with that but do we want to make it hit somebody in the heart? Do we want it to become something that pushes them in a new direction as a reader? To feel it? Not only to hear it but to feel it. Take that image one step further, bring it to life in a new way, right, we give them something like this: the horse piss eating deep snow. And we leave with a new connection to the way in which something terrible and unfortunately ordinary like cancer, is now presented in a new way. It hurts even more and that's what Dubie arguably, I don't know for a fact, but I imagine, that's what he wanted to get across. Right?

The speed, the terror of it, how ugly it was, but he found a way to compare it to something else that gave me that understanding without having just to say it. We started to talk about image and how image makes something come to life, and I said you guys would probably rather see it than have me tell you about it. Well it's the same thing with figurative language. We take it to another level by using those comparisons to give us the chance to share something new with the audience.

So same thing as with an image. When I see a simile or if I unpack a really direct metaphor in a poem as I reader, I recognize there's probably something there. It's a key, it's a way in to understand a feeling, an emotion, an idea that potentially this writer really wants me to get from the piece. So as a writer, if you use these, you'll be able to kinda signal to the reader, "Hey look at this. Pay attention here. There's something happening."

The last thing I'll say about simile and metaphor is don't be afraid to be wild or to be fresh. I think of a kind of base simile: love is a rose. What does that say? It says, love is beautiful but it also might hurt you. Take that same idea, but make it more interesting. I think of Bukowski's "love is a dog from hell." It's saying the exact same thing, right? Love can be something great. It's man's best friend. It's the thing you want around you all the time. It will cuddle with you. It will be there for you. But it will also bite your head off.

It will also bite you back. It will hurt you. So there's a new way to look at even some of the most mundane ideas or images, and that's the fun part about writing. We were saying at the beginning, it's the shifting relationship between language and structure. You have the letters of the alphabet to make the words to make the lines to make the stanzas. Try to say them in a new way, and I think figurative language helps you do that by using simile and metaphor.

Just a couple more things. What happens when you take that image or that piece of figurative

language and you try to put it in a poem, and you think about what's called the line... I'll be the first to say, the line is there just like the stanza's there to give form to the poem. Sometimes the line is there because it's trying to follow a rhyme scheme. Sometimes it's there because it wants to add to the form in some other way. I don't believe, really, that there's one way to look at the line, but I think there are a lot of things the line can do, and if we actually pay attention to what that line can do, instead of just putting our poems out there just because it, I think it looks pretty in this many words or with lines of this length or stanzas that are this thick. I think if we actually consider what the line does, new things come out of the poem.

So, I've got some examples for myself, and I want to read you just one of them. There are so many poets that use the line in really interesting ways. I think of a poet some of you might know, William's "The Red Wheelbarrow." Go back and really consider why he's using the lines that way. I won't get into it now. But when I was trying to decide what to kinda of talk about, maybe talk about Whitman and his line lengths, and the way in which, I don't know, Doug Powell, a contemporary writer, uses really beautiful lines. But I decided I wanted to share with you one that's really interesting to me and that's a poem by Robert Creeley.

Creeley was really in the breath, and he wrote a poem called "The Language" that I think really illustrates what a line can do. Now I'm not exactly sure how to do this. If I show it to you, if you'll be able to see it. So what I'm gonna do is I'm gonna read maybe the first two stanzas straight through without paying attention to the line breaks and then I'm gonna just show you what he did and what it actually changes if you read them the way he's presented them.

So it's called "The Language" and, without paying attention to the line breaks, I'll just read through the beginning. "Locate I love you somewhere in teeth and eyes, bite it but take care not to hurt, you want so much so little. Words say everything." This is the first couple stanzas. But what Creeley actually did in playing with that breath is he broke those lines into just a couple words per line. Denise Levertov said something that I think a lot of poets say which is, when you get to the end of the line you give the reader the, excuse me, the writer the respect of giving it a half comma. You pause for a second to take in what that line was, and you look at the line as a unit, and yes that unit spills over to the next line, but you look at what it's doing on its own.

So, if I read this, instead of reading it straight through, and I read it based on the way the lines are presented, it would sound like this. Now I'll emphasize a little bit more than I might usually, but why not? We're on a MOOC. Let's do what we want. "The Language."

Locate I
love you some-
where in

teeth and
eyes, bite
it but

take care not
to hurt, you
want so

much so
little. Words
say everything.

I
love you
again,

then what
is emptiness
for. To

fill, fill.
I heard words
and words full

of holes
aching. Speech
is a mouth.

Now obviously I emphasized that a little bit, but what he's done is he's shown a sense of hesitation. You can hear that when I read it. Now what is the poem actually saying? Locate I love you somewhere in teeth and eyes. He's trying to say, "I love you." The words are in the mouth. they're in my teeth. They're in my mouth. They're in my eyes. But I can't say it because it's hard. Now is that more interesting, putting it on the page as an active way, than just saying, "love is a difficult thing to admit to somebody."

He's showing you not only the feeling of it but he's providing you with that hesitation by cutting off the line. And then new things happen. The line isn't--later in the poem--it's not, "you want"--I'll dial it back a bit, "take care not to hurt. You want so much so little." That's not the line. The line is actually,

"take care not
to hurt, you"

To hurt you is only one line even though the line is supposed to be--or the words, with the comma there--hard to see it. Maybe someone can give you a version of it online. The line is "take care not to hurt, you want so much so little." But because the line gives us a double meaning. As Shakespeare would say, "there's a double meaning in that." It gives us a double meaning by presenting it in a new way. It

looks like it's saying "to hurt you"--not just "to hurt, you want so much so little." So he's drawing a new attention to what the line can mean to generate more of that confusion, that instability, that frustration of what it means to try to say I love you.

Later he says, "You want so much so little." But the way the line is broken the actual line reads, "little period words." So you read the line as "little words." I love you, three words. Actually pretty big but they're also pretty little. So without having to say it, he gives it to you on the page, and that's what a line can do. Now again, You can use the line to emphasize a rhyme scheme. You can use a line to emphasize many other things in writing, but I think, if you start to break that down and you really consider, what is the line? What is the unit doing? How can I get a new meaning out of it? If I break here, does it call more attention to a line? Or does it maybe mask rhyme? Or does it show some frustration or fear or uncertainty?

You are the one in control of your words that make the line. So if we go all the way back to what we were saying in the beginning, you're building this house. What do you want that wall to look like? What do you want that structural beam to be like? Is it gonna be enough to support the whole poem? How can the line function maybe in more interesting ways?

I would encourage you again, read Dough Powell. Go back and read those Whitman poems and think about the length of the line and then dial it all the way back and look again at more Creeley. And that's a sort of brief conversation about the line.

OK, so just a couple more things then. I'll repeat one idea, which is I don't believe there's one way to write a line. I think that, as writers, every poem we write is different. Every time we use a line, it's different. But I do think you should pay attention to how it's working. If you're not sure why you're breaking a line, don't break the line. Try to be in control of that because you are in control of it. We're not writing prose, unless we're writing prose poetry, which is a whole other MOOC conversation.

But if you want to break that line, make sure the line itself is functioning. One thing that lines often help accent is sound, repetition, rhyme. I could talk a lot about rhyme scheme, but I'm sure that's something many of you either already know, or maybe someone else in the MOOC will talk about that.

But I do think that, just like imagery, when it flashes, I think we have to look at it. Just like figurative language, when it flashes, we have to look at it. Just like the line, if there's something happening we have to read it. That's when we understand the hesitation. So if it flashes we have to look at it. Music, the rhyme, the sound of a poem also should be something we pay attention to.

So when we write, if we know we want to draw somebody's attention, maybe fall into music. Again, millions of poems that I could show an example to, but I get to decide what I share, so I'm going to share this one. This is a poem that, oftentimes when I share with students, they don't hear or see the sound, repetition, rhyme, music on their own right at first. But as we keep talking about it, they'll point out what happened.

So I'm just going to read it. It's a very quick poem by Denis Johnson. It's called "White, White Collars." And just listen to what he does with the sound. As always i will pause a little bit at the end of each line so you can hear the rhythm but here it goes. "White, White Collars."

We work in this building and we are hideous
 in the fluorescent light, you know our clothes
 woke up this morning and swallowed us like jewels
 and ride up and down the elevators, filled with us,
 turning and returning like the spray of light that goes
 around dance-halls among the dancing fools.
 My office smells like a theory, but here one weeps
 to see the goodness of the world laid bare
 and rising with the government on its lips,
 the alphabet congealing in the air
 around our heads. But in my belly's flames
 someone is dancing, calling me by many names
 that are secret and filled with light and rise
 and break, and I see my previous lives.

Go back to the beginning of that poem, the very first line is, "We work in this building and we are hideous." The speaker doesn't seem real happy. White collars, working his job, going up escalators, gettin' in elevators, living the grind, the daily life. And as he keeps moving on, things are hideous, people are dancing fools, his office smells like a theory, and then there's a moment--there's a turn, where he says, "But in my belly's flames someone is dancing, calling me by many names."

I'm not this shirt. I can say well I'm not the guy in the tie, right? I'm not controlled by this world around me. He sees something in himself that's different. So what happens when he sees what at first is hideous, when he sees inside him, there's beauty, he breaks into song. I'll read that last part again. Here's the shift:

But in my belly's flames
 someone is dancing, calling me by many names
 that are secret and filled with light and rise
 and break, and I see my previous lives.

He falls almost into perfect meter. He follows a rhyme scheme at the end that's aabb, coming out of nowhere. There's been a few off-rhymes throughout, but never a rhyme scheme, and he falls into song. So again, when it flashes like that. The sound, the music, shows me the change in the speaker. It shows me the beauty that he is suddenly seeing, and he doesn't have to tell it to me.

Poetry often is called the economy of language. Meaning that we think we can say something, get it across, show the reader without them having to spend as much--I don't want to say time, but without them having to read as many words about it, that we can give it to them, we can make them

feel it.

We don't always have to just write it down and say it. "I am not my job. I'm better than that. I've got something else inside me." It's not as interesting as if I show it, if I sing it, if I let it come to life. So yes, image is important. Yes, figurative language is important. We have to use the line to present it in that way, but sound can do that too.

You can write in regular meter. You can write in regular rhyme scheme. Any of those things are fine, but also allow yourself to play around with breaking into rhyme, to break into sound, to use repetition, to say something a couple times to drive home a point. There's no...I'm gonna say rhyme or reason. But there is a rhyme and reason. You can make these choices, but it doesn't have to be regular.

Here is a poem that I think really utilizes its shift into some kind of sonic vocal annunciation, where he starts to sing in the poem, you pay attention as a reader. So if you're the writer, know that you can use that as well. It's a tool that you can use. What if I use a lot of rhyme here? What if I break into meter? What if I break into song? What if I repeat words and words and words? What will the reader do? What will it feel like to them?

And these are choices you get to make. And that's a little bit about sound. Other writers that use sound really really well and in very interesting ways, obviously Gerard Manley Hopkins is a writer I think of often. Going all the way back to Poe. Go reread "The Raven" if you haven't in a while. It's crazy.

And to be honest, I don't think it's that far off from what someone like Eminem or Nas is doing in the world of hip hop. You're using sound to bend and shift and break ideas and present them in new ways that allow a reader to hear something in a new way, to cause themselves to pause for a second and look at that word in a new way, just like we did with the Denis Johnson poem. Here we thought about that last line, those last two lines, those last four lines in a different way because they fell into song. Yeah.

The last thing then that I'll talk about and it will be very very very brief is the idea of form. In a brief video lecture like this, I can't get too much into, you know, all the various rules of prosody, or the ways that we can look at language and look at iambs and trochees and all these things, but if you are ever stuck as a writer, and you understand a little bit about how an image can work, and you understand the figurative language and the rhymes and the lines, if you feel like you either can't write, or you want to push yourself in a new direction, or if some kind of constraint helps you, or you're just interested in writing in that way, I would encourage you to look at forms.

Everything from the very strict rules of something like a sonnet, to a little bit more play that you get in something like a sestina. Buying a book on form will really help you, not only to read poets that use these forms. I think of a kind of... I guess we'd call him a contemporary master of form, but someone like Donald Justice. Read his work to understand how he uses form.

But understand how you can also break it. There's a wonderful book by a writer named Srikanth Reddy, and the book is called *Facts for Visitors*. And if you go through those poems, he writes a lot of what are villanelles, but you realize pretty quickly that many of them are failed villanelles. And the book ends, not in the very end but near the end with a poem called "Sonnet," but it's not a sonnet at all. And yet is it a sonnet?

And that sounds abstract. I'm sorry that I don't have the poem with me, but I guess what I'm trying to say about form is there's a great advantage to using constraint, if that works for you. But I will go all the way back to what I was saying at the beginning, and that's poetry doesn't have to be one thing. Poetry doesn't have to sound like "these woods these are I think I know," but it can.

A poem doesn't have to be a sonnet, but it can be. A poem doesn't have to use similes and metaphors or it can. You can build--see how we return all the way back to the beginning--you can build the house however you want it to look. You should be comfortable with the structure. You should be comfortable with the rooms. You should be comfortable with what you hang on the walls, what images you use, what figurative language you use, how you build up that space.

It should also be something that you want to invite people into, and so maybe a form allows this person access, and maybe the absence of form allows this person access. But it's up to you. And the very kinda last thing that I'll say is if you keep all these things in mind, and you think about building. And like I said, Roethke says, you know, you should understand that writing is difficult, and we should be excited by that difficulty.

I don't think poetry needs to be scary. I heard Seamus Heaney came to read once in Iowa City, and he said, "Sometimes when people hear the word poetry, they think they have to flip a switch in their mind. They have to hold onto the sides of the chair, and they have to go, 'Oh man, everything's got a double meaning and everything's a metaphor, and I'm not gonna understand. I have to read it four hundred times, go to the library, figure everything out. It's a riddle.'"

Maybe that's true for some people. I don't think that's always the case. I think good poetry has heart. I think good poetry takes risks. I think good poetry builds itself to be the thing it wants to be. And if it sticks with other readers, that's great. You can start to understand if it will work, or encourage it to work more successfully if you keep in mind those five ideas we were talking about, if you keep in mind the images, the figurative language, the use of the line, the sound and the form.

But also if you break away from those, there's nothing wrong with it. Roethke also said--I'm using a lot of him today--but he also said, you know, "good poets can't be afraid of the strange." So don't be afraid of the strange. Build a strange house. That's OK. Take risks, fall down, fail, but try. If you keep these ideas in mind, you read more writers, you keep these things right at your fingertips, and you employ them at different times, and you find your strengths, the writing will improve, but more importantly, the readers will start to get more out of your work, and you will feel better about what you are able to produce.

Welcome back. Danny counsels us to build a poem in any way that we see fit, and for this session,

we invite you to construct a poem in stanzas, in quatrains, in tercets, in couplets, in blocks--whatever seems to fit your mood and your imagination.

And thinking about the craft talks we've had so far, we'd like to see you using some of the sketched lines, the collected lines, things like that, as your building materials. We'd also like you to include at least one image and one metaphor and post it to the forum. We're really excited to see what you come up with.

Good luck.